

Some Thoughts on William Dean Howells at 150

by James L. Murphy

THE FIRST OF March, 1987, marked the 150th anniversary of the birth of William Dean Howells. Has the "really beautiful time" that Henry James predicted for Howells actually come? Perhaps it never will, but Howells's reputation has certainly and steadily increased since 1937, when the *Saturday Review of Literature* could assure him only "a modest immortality" based upon his importance as a technician and as "a faithful repository of antiquarian material belonging to the last half of the nineteenth century." The *Review's* faint praise ("His mind was neither very powerful nor startlingly original, but his perceptions were sure, his integrity was absolute, and his craftsmanship as good as any in our literature") was, still, a reassessment, disavowing previous judgements that Howells was "timid, time-serving, and superficial," with "a fastidious dislike of hairy-chested expressions" and an inability to deal with the problems of sex.

If, as Howells observed in one of his most-remembered remarks, Samuel Clemens is "the Lincoln of our literature," then Howells himself, at least in his later years, might be reckoned as something of our literature's Clemenceau. Be-leaguered by critics who found him antiquated and irrelevant, the elderly Howells was particularly the object of H. L. Mencken's scorn. Mencken, whose wit did not always exceed his wrath, charged Howells with "triviality" and "narrowness of vision," calling him the author of "a long row of uninspired and hollow books," with no more ideas in them than so many volumes of *The Ladies Home Journal*. Although Mencken was far from unique in belaboring Howells with such harsh criticism, he was the most strident, in private referring to, the "Dean" of American Letters as a "somewhat kittenish old maid."

Because it has been so gradual, it is surprising to realize that the Howells revival does date back at least to his centennial in 1937. In an "Atlantic Portrait" that year, Owen Wister emphasized Howells's ability at characterization and his realism. Observing that all novels "date," Wister declared that "the mirrors of none, though they may blaze more brutally, give reflection so clear in moulding and outline, so quiet, so undistorted, as those which the delicate art of William Dean Howells held up to nature in his day." A less grandiloquent essay of Newton Arvin in *The New Republic* provides, all in all, a very modern perspective on Howells: noting Howells's limitations due partly to "that excessive and essentially unwholesome fastidiousness of which so much has been made, and which in fact was almost as heavy a handicap, for a serious realist, as some critics have taken it to be," noting that Howells never broke entirely with the Swedenborgian mysticism of his father nor with Transcendentalist idealism, Arvin concluded that however philosophically shaky the basis of Howells's realism, it was the basis "on which Howells was bound to write, given the circumstances; and if it qualifies, it does not at all undermine the extraordinary interest of his work for us, or keep it from being 'usable' in a sense in which the work of no one of his contemporaries quite is."

Though he was clearly appreciated, it did take another twenty years before Howells received his full due, in Edwin H. Cady's two volume biography. That, probably, was the watershed, and since then there has been a steady flow of Howells criticism, bibliography, critical editions, and biographical works. This fall, Ohio State University Press will publish the letters of Elinor Mead Howells, sure proof that the wellspring of Howells studies has not yet quite run dry.

Still, as Howells himself recognized, in a less well-remembered remark, in this case to Henry James, "I am comparatively a dead cult with my statues cut down and the grass growing over them in the pale moonlight." His assessment remains true today, unfortunately, for probably to even a greater extent than the members of James's cult, the members of Howells's consist mostly of college professors and their students.

Whether you view it as a tribute to William Dean Howells's 150th birthday or as preparing well in advance for his bicentennial, read a Howells novel or two. Your local library, as they say, will be glad to help you.

REVIEWER: *James L. Murphy, a cataloger at Ohio State University Libraries, wrote "The Poet's Friend? A Jab at the Youthful William Dean Howells," which appeared in OHIOANA QUARTERLY, autumn 1986. He also reviewed The Black Heart's Truth: The Early Career of W. D. Howells by John W. Crowley, in OHIOANA QUARTERLY, summer 1987.*